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SUBJECT: TFGG01: THE VIEW OF THE WAR IN MOSCOW

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Eric S. Rubin. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. PM Putin moved into the spotlight with his visit to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia late August 9, though he and President Medvedev appeared jointly this morning to emphasize the "humanitarian tragedy" in South Ossetia and the need for legal consequences. The GOR has not veered from its insistence on the humanitarian and legal "justifications" for its intervention. The Russian media, with few exceptions, is placing the blame for starting the conflict and the guilt for civilian casualties on Georgia, emphasizing that Russia had no choice but to intervene, and highlighting the humanitarian crisis and plight of the South Ossetians. A few lone voices are criticizing Russia for having gone too far, and the most liberal fringe is blasting Russia for its military campaign. There is still some anger against the U.S., and some continue to question whether the U.S. gave Tbilisi the green light, but such criticism is fairly muted due, experts say, to concerns about the conflict becoming a broader U.S.-Russia crisis; something nobody wants, they add. The Russian Federal Registration Service maintains it has registered 34,000 people as having fled the violence, with 22,000 in the Russian Federation, but UNHCR has privately questioned the number. End summary.

Who's in Charge?

12. (C) Pundits continue to debate who is really calling the shots. Following press coverage of the morning meeting between Medvedev and Putin where the emphasis was on humanitarian relief and Putin's "suggestion" to Medvedev that he ask the Military Prosecutor to document instances of "genocide," the two men have been little in view, though there appears to be greater news coverage of Putin. With his trip to Vladikavkaz and statements questioning Georgia's territorial integrity, Putin has seized the spotlight. Some experts note that Putin has the experience of having fought a war before, but contend he is not undercutting Medvedev, and his public comments have mostly focused on humanitarian and legal issues. Carnegie Moscow Center expert Dmitriy Trenin suggested to us that the military trusted Putin more, as he was more of a known quantity in crisis situations.

The Legalistic Arguments

13. (C) Russian officials continue to use legalistic arguments for Russia's military intervention. Putin and Medvedev, for instance, called on the Military Prosecutor's office to document cases of possible genocide so those responsible could be charged with criminal acts. FM Lavrov, in his BBC interview (in English) August 9, also stressed the legal and constitutional underpinnings of Russia's actions. Trenin

posited that Putin and Medvedev were seeking to get rid of Saakashvili, by doing to him what the West had done to Milosevic in 1999 - "put Saakashvili in the dock and expose his war crimes." Thus, the references to "punishing those responsible." Putin and Medvedev knew if Russian forces moved into Tbilisi, it would strengthen Saakashvili, not topple him, so the goal was to make it politically impossible for Saakashvili to remain in power.

14. (SBU) Russian Federation Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin echoed Putin and Medvedev's calls for punishing those responsible for the violence against South Ossetia. Lukin told reporters August 10 that an international tribunal must be set up and those guilty of killing thousands of civilians in South Ossetia must be held to account. Lukin said that "an international tribunal must be set up specifically for this purpose, as was done in many other instances of mass annihilation of civilians and mass destruction of cities." The irony of these statements was not lost on some. The human rights group Memorial, who on August 9 had called on Georgia to honor its OSCE commitments and cease the fighting immediately, quickly drew a parallel between the recent events in South Ossetia and Russia's military campaigns in Chechnya.

The War Russians are Seeing  
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15. (C) With the exception of human rights groups, some liberal voices and blogs, most Russian media has overwhelmingly placed the blame for the conflict on Georgia, and focused heavily on the humanitarian crisis that has ensued. Even liberal-leaning experts believe that President Saakashvili, provoked or unprovoked, badly miscalculated and must be held responsible for sparking the sudden escalation of violence. Echoing the remarks of Prime Minister Putin, Ekho Moskvii Editor-in-Chief Aleksei Venediktov chastised Saakashvili for inflicting irreparable harm on his own citizens, adding that a president should not be so easily provoked. There is widespread support for Medvedev's and Putin's actions, though some commentators believe Russia has gone too far in its use of force. Although there is still some anger against the U.S., and some continue to question whether the U.S. gave Tbilisi the green light, criticism of the U.S. is fairly muted. This is likely due, some experts say, to concerns about the conflict becoming a broader U.S.-Russia crisis; something nobody wants, they add. (Today the Embassy had its second protest by pro-Kremlin youth groups, with about 200 gathered in the rain; separately a small group of aged Cossacks in uniform posed for the TV cameras).

16. (SBU) The largest television channels -- Channel 1, NTV, and Channel Russia -- continued to paint Russian operations in South Ossetia as humanitarian and necessary to protect the civilian population from the Georgian military offensive. The newscasts continued to finger Georgia for opening this war and that Georgia was responsible for the majority of the civilian casualties. Television stations also reported the Abkhazian attacks in the upper Kodori and the deployment of the Black Sea Fleet off the coast of Georgia. On the mainly government controlled television networks, there was no criticism of Russian leadership or the actions taken since the opening of the conflict on Thursday.

17. (U) The images of the violence in South Ossetia were vivid. Broadcasts focused relentlessly on injured South Ossetian civilians and refugees. They broadcast phone interviews with Tskhinvali residents hiding in bomb shelters, with background images of civilians sheltering in the dark without food, water, or medical assistance. The Channel 1 eleven o'clock broadcast portrayed the deployment of Russian armor, highlighting that the presence of Russian forces allowed the flow of food and medical aid to the region. Channel Russia ran news coverage over the banner "Humanitarian Catastrophe in South Ossetia." Russia Today, the English-language channel, ran the banner "genocide" constantly and showed South Ossetian residents in Moscow

reporting harrowing tales from relatives in the conflict zone. NTV in its coverage from Tbilisi quoted the Russian Ambassador to Georgia to say, "In Tskhinvali 2,000 civilians were killed - this is a result of Georgian bombardments." The NTV correspondent also stated that Georgian officials were not presenting the facts about the war to the Georgian public, "the data about the losses are ignored by the Georgian authorities because of fear that it will cause doubt about the necessity of a small victorious war with South Ossetia."

¶18. (U) All major channels carried coverage of Putin's visit to North Ossetia on the evening of August 9, where he met with injured Russian "peacekeepers" in a military field hospital, discussed the humanitarian needs of those remaining in Tskhinvali with Ministry of Emergency Situations officials, and spoke with refugees. Putin pledged that the GOR would finance the reconstruction of South Ossetia infrastructure and social services, announcing that Russia had allocated 500 million Rubles (USD 21 million) in assistance.

#### Russian Blogs: Support for Ossetians

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¶19. (SBU) Russian internet users -- who largely represent a young, upper-middle class demographic -- are actively commenting on the conflict, with approximately eighty percent from the sites we read expressing support for South Ossetia, favoring Russian military action, blaming Georgia, and suspecting US involvement in the conflict. The search engine Yandex.ru recorded almost 31,000 comments about the conflict to Russian blogs in the past 3 days, and fora of popular Russian newspapers likewise received more than 15,000 comments. A typical comment, from a Kommersant online forum contributor, said, "I know it is only Putin that can stand up to the Americans, I implore him to do so without relenting," while another person commented, "Without question, Georgia has opened this wound and in a cowardly fashion tried to make the conflict international by calling on the EU and the USA to assist their war of occupation." Also, a popular Moscow-based music television program displayed scrolling cell phone text messages sent from Russian youth around the country expressing their support of South Ossetia.

¶10. (C) One of Russia's most popular bloggers, Dmitriy Galkovsky, blamed the "general bankruptcy of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation" during the 1990s for the conflict and noted that Georgia gained its original territory in full conformity with international law. He criticized previous US military cooperation with Georgia and said that if the conflict continued to escalate, it would become like the war in Yugoslavia, with Moscow not bombing, but instead having its "peacekeepers" march on to Tbilisi and maybe even Ukraine.

#### A Few Lone Critics

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¶11. (C) On the other hand, the same commentators who criticized Saakashvili have focused an equal amount of attention on Russia's role prior to and during the conflict. For example, the Weekly Journal noted that Russia, despite its peacekeeping role, unjustifiably gave passports to South Ossetians who were de jure citizens of Georgia. As for Russia's response to the current violence, Venediktov, Trenin and others pointed out that Russia's military campaign outside the conflict zone went beyond the constitutional mandate to protect Russian peacekeepers and citizens. The Russian Army itself was now responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians. Venediktov went on to chastise Russian officials for their hypocrisy.

¶12. (C) Russia's most liberal fringe came out swinging against the GOR's military campaign. Breshnev-era dissident and well-know human rights defender Sergey Kovalyev, Director of the Moscow-based Human Rights Institute, called on the international community to condemn "Russia's aggression

against Georgia" and to exclude it from the G-8 as well as sanction it at the UN, OSCE and COE. Human rights defender Yelena Bonner similarly called on the UN to end the peacekeeping mandate of Russia since it had violated the mandate when it introduced its own troops into the conflict zone. Bonner pressed for NATO or the UN to introduce peacekeepers into the conflict zone. Lev Ponomarev, head of the human rights organization "For Human Rights," has started collecting signatures from within the civil society community against the escalation of the military conflict in South Ossetia. Ponomarev told us only he and Kovalyev have signed the statement so far, but he has not yet posted it on his website.

#### No Backlash Against Georgians

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¶13. In contrast to the vicious fall 2006 campaign against ethnic Georgians, Aleksandr Verkhovskiy from the SOVA Center that monitors violence against ethnic minorities in Russia, told us August 10 there had been no reports yet of any ethnic violence in Russia aimed at Georgians stemming from the conflict in South Ossetia. He said that SOVA would keep a close watch on this given the harassment and violence towards ethnic Georgians in 2006.

#### Humanitarian Assistance Seen as Adequate

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¶14. (SBU) The Russian Federal Registration Service maintains it has registered 34,000 people as having fled the violence, of whom 22,000 remained in the Russian Federation - a number UNHCR has privately questioned. The Ministry for Emergency Situations announced that 14 dormitories at institutes of higher learning had been prepared to accommodate evacuees, four tented camps would be established in the Alagir district of North Ossetia to feed and accommodate up to 2,000 evacuees, 200 buses had been provided to assist in evacuating residents of South Ossetia and that the ministry planned to use Mi-26 transport helicopters to transport humanitarian assistance to South Ossetia. The head of International Rescue Committee,s (IRC) North Caucasus operations based in Vladikavkaz, said that conditions in those several of the centers used to house evacuees he visited were fine and there was good government and community support for the evacuees. Caucasian Knot also reported that during his visit to Vladikavkaz on August 9, Putin announced that the Russian government would provide ten billion rubles (approximately USD 425 million) to rebuild destroyed housing in South Ossetia and 500 million rubles (approximately USD 21 million) in additional assistance to North Ossetia.

¶15. (SBU) The IRC head said that on August 9 there were booths on the main street in Vladikavkaz stoking tempers against Georgia and trying to enlist those able-bodied men in North Ossetia who are not members of the reserves to join. Caucasian Knot reported that on August 8 thousands of people demonstrated in support of South Ossetia in the Dagestani city of Khasavyurt. According to Caucasian Knot 1,500 members of Dagestan,s irregular militia, most of whom defended against the invasion of Dagestan in 1999 by Chechen separatists, have signed a list of volunteers to assist the people of South Ossetia. Twelve emergency workers have already left Dagestan to provide assistance in South Ossetia, according to reporting in Caucasian Knot.

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